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EDWIN YODER COLUMN

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WASHINGTON--Whether William Webster actually ``retired'' as director of Central Intelligence or was gently thrown overboard in a quiet Washington coup is not especially important. What is important is Webster's sterling performance in two sensitive administrative posts, at the FBI and the CIA. The record speaks for itself, though whether the message will be correctly decoded is another question.

The message was scrupulous legality. Webster, a U.S. district judge, was plucked from relative obscurity in 1978 by Griffin Bell, President Carter's attorney general. The FBI had been headed before Webster by two dim directors who had done little for its standing. J. Edgar Hoover's earlier, all but absolute, reign had left the agency vaguely shadowed by a reputation for subtle blackmail, of which the Martin Luther King wiretapping affair was the most notorious example.

As acting director after Hoover's departure, L. Patrick Gray managed to entangle himself and the FBI in the Watergate affair. Indeed it was Gray who was, in the famous phrase, left to ``twist slowly, slowly in the wind'' after he burned telltale documents at John Dean's bidding. His successor Clarence Kelly, a Midwestern lawman, busied FBI personnel in the decoration of his home and did not improve the bureau's reputation--or his own. Enter Webster; and it is enough to say that when he left the FBI nearly a decade later, the taint of indiscretion and of the shadowy and unaccountable power accumulated by J. Edgar Hoover had utterly vanished.

In 1987, Webster undertook a similar cleanup job at the CIA. William Casey, the previous director, had never recovered from the romance of the Office of Strategic Services and operated as a law unto himself. Casey's swashbuckling style featured the deception not only of enemies, real and imagined, but of powerful U.S. senators and even (if you believe the Iran-contra testimony) of the president himself.

So the common theme of Webster's stewardship was a determination to restore legality and professionalism and, at the CIA, to separate intelligence gathering and analysis from the contamination of policy preferences. This separation had been critically needed since the Vietnam period, when Richard Helms and other agency professionals battled against heavy pressure to tailor estimates on the war to the Johnson administration's disastrous impulse to put the best face on everything. Webster leaves a CIA as clear as such an agency can be of the suspicion of being out of control.

With Webster's departure, George Bush has an excellent chance to take a fresh look at the role of the CIA, including the fundamental question of whether the time has come to decentralize intelligence functions.

The idea of consolidating those functions--the essence of the CIA when it was created in 1947--was the product of a novel national security threat. In that pivotal year of early Cold War hostilities, the United States was forced to acknowledge, reluctantly, that the peace-keeping plans of the war years weren't working. The nation found itself thrust into a climate of rivalry

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with the Soviet Union--including political subversion and black propaganda--alien to democratic traditions.

Alongside, or behind, the traditional world of statecraft there was developing a back alley of dirty deeds which the United States had to cope with; and sometimes coping meant emulating them, tit for tat. There, laws and decencies were often ignored. And while the Cold War remained the commanding fact of international life, a lesser-evil argument could be made for tolerating this insidious realm of extra-legality and secretiveness.

That case has been severely eroded today. But even if there is a case for keeping intelligence centralized, the future of intelligence gathering and analysis in a world of economic competition and small-state terrorism needs careful review, as does the often-remarked failures of ``human intelligence'' as against intelligence gathered by high-tech methods.

By the appointment he makes, George Bush will indicate whether he thinks nostalgia or fresh thinking should rule the future of national intelligence.